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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 GUATEMALA 001191

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SUBJECT: GUATEMALA: LATEST DEVELOPMENTS ON MILITARY ROLE IN INTERNAL SECURITY

REF: USDAO GUATEMALA IIR 6 838 9928 05 (DTG 141910Z APR 05)

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Hamilton, Reason: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Worried about continuing problems with public security, Guatemala has formalized arrangements for police-military cooperation by forming a dedicated unit for this purpose that has a combined police-military staff and leadership. The GOG has explicitly named gangs, organized crime, drug trafficking, illegal migration, and other types of crime as the threats that this unit will combat. Defense Ministry plans for expanding the unit's geographic coverage to include the entire country remain in flux. The new GOG approach does not involve any expanded powers for the military personnel in the unit. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Following a briefing about a new police-military Task Force that the GOG Minister of Defense presented to Embassy DAATT (reftel), PolMilOff sought confirmation of GOG plans in meetings with Civilian National Police (PNC) Operations Director Commissioner General Julio Hernandez Chavez, Vice Minister of Government (Interior) Alfredo Caceres, Armed Forces Operations Chief (D-3) Colonel Miguel Perez Lopez, and Defense Ministry Legal Department Director Colonel Juan Recinos. While differing somewhat on the details, the GOG police and military officials confirmed that civilian and military authorities are in agreement on a dedicated unit for joint police and military operations.

¶3. (C) To recap, this unit consists of approximately 900 military personnel and 500 PNC personnel, organized in a military police brigade and a police patrol brigade. This force, called Joint Task Force Guatemala (JTF-G) by the Guatemalan military, has a joint staff structure, with police and military personnel in more or less equal numbers in the five staff sections: S-1 (Personnel), S-2 (Intelligence), S-3 (Operations), S-4 (Logistics), and S-5 (Civil Affairs). The operational joint commanders of the unit are Brigadier General Edgar Escobar, Deputy Chief of the National Defense Staff, and Vice Minister of Government Alfredo Caceres. (Note: Colonels Perez and Recinos claimed that the police would take the lead in recruitment of informants to gain intelligence on gangs. End Note.)

¶4. (C) According to Defense Minister Aldana, the military's plan is to assign a company from the Joint Task Force to each of the five infantry brigades deployed outside of the capital. However, the military does not have funds to execute such deployments. In addition, Vice Minister Caceres and Commissioner General Hernandez appeared to view national deployments as more of a long-term process as they spoke of the eventual creation of an additional three police brigades to cover other parts of Guatemala.

¶5. (C) The Defense Ministry drafted an interagency agreement to govern the operations of the new Joint Task Force. After revision by Ministry of Government lawyers, the decree was signed by President Berger during an April 25 cabinet meeting. However, the signed decree then went to the Secretary General of the Presidency for further review.

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According to Col. Recinos, Secretary General lawyers significantly watered down the decree and deleted all references to the Joint Task Force. As of May 9, Recinos had still not seen the final version of the decree, nor had it been published in GOG's version of the Federal Register. Recinos opined that the only substantive effect of the decree was to formalize interagency financial arrangements for funding the task force.

¶6. (C) The Joint Task Force has undertaken limited operations in Guatemala City only, with the military executing its customary role as perimeter security for the police. Col. Perez reported that the military has not participated in any of the highly publicized, large-scale sweeps of high-crime zones conducted by the police members of the Joint Task Force, operations that have been criticized by the Human Rights Ombudsman (PDH) and the Government Commission on Human Rights (COPREDEH) for their alleged arbitrary detentions (septel). Col. Perez stated that the Joint Task Force would not begin full-scale operations until the decree's status was clarified.

17. (C) Comment: The Guatemalan public is increasingly alarmed by violent crime, which shows no sign of abating. The cash-starved GOG is desperate to show some success in improving public security but has been unable to deploy additional resources to address the situation. The police, prosecutors and courts are still perceived as largely ineffective in preventing or punishing crime. In this context, it is not surprising to see the GOG direct the military to support police patrols as a force multiplier. Concentration of police and military members in dedicated units for joint patrols (as opposed to the previous ad hoc arrangements), and formation of a combined police and military staff to direct this force, were widely reported in the media as two major new developments in the military's role in support of public security. To the best of our knowledge, the actual tasks performed by the military members, and the legal authorities of these members, have not changed with the formation of the new task force. National deployment, and even an expansion of the targets of the task force to include organized crime, etc., will require additional funding as well as closer coordination between the military and police.

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